

# Imagination and reality: modernist fiction in the light of Wallace Stevens' poetics of abstraction

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## Abstract

To Wallace Stevens the artist is determined by his relation to the "pressure of reality." When the artist erases or evades the pressure reality is absorbed by the imagination so that the interdependence between reality and imagination is aesthetically metamorphosed by a process of abstraction, and the artist's power is measured by his ability to abstract himself and to withdraw reality with him into his abstraction. Here, Stevens has formulated nothing less than a poetics of abstraction. In this essay the significance of his poetics will be examined by applying it to modernist fiction, embarking from a reading by Stevens' own poem "The Snow Man" (1921), where the aural sense, listening, prevents and excludes a fanciful attachment to the unreal and allows for the interdependence and the merging of imagination and reality, a poetic abstraction that is embedded in nature itself. In Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy* (1957), Haruki Murakami's short story "TV People" (1993), and Paul Auster's novel *4321* (2017) we find a problematising, even a denigration of vision as the characters are drawn to petrified images that obviate perception and insight. Bruno Schulz' novella "Cinnamon Shops" (1934) forms an exception in that the experience of illumination and expansion, taking place in winter, is precipitated by a unifying of the senses, aural, visual and tactile. The first-person narrator abstracts himself and abstracts reality by placing it in the imagination, to use Stevens' phrase.

**Keywords:** abstraction; ontological congruity;  
imagination and reality; possible poet

In his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," part of the collection *The Necessary Angel* from 1942, Wallace Stevens explores the relationship between reality and the imagination. He discards Plato's attribution of nobility and perfection to the soul, the animate being – which Plato illustrates by the image of winged horses driven by the charioteer of the gods – because it rings false in contemporary ears to whom the soul may no longer exist. The figure of the charioteer of the gods becomes antiquated and rustic. It is unreal for us and, Stevens says, it was as unreal for Plato as it is for us. The difference between Plato and us is that Plato was able to yield himself to the unreal whereas we are not free to do so. "We" means 'me' and 'you' as representatives of a state of mind, Stevens says, and the contemporary state of mind as it emerges and conceives of itself in 1942 and after has gone through subtle psychological changes that make it difficult to submit to Plato's images even though they are emotionally potent. The sense of not feeling free to yield to the unreal today may be traced to these changes. The nature of the changes is psychological but not only. The changes involve the human mind on the cognitive level

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and here they create a sceptical response to Plato's charioteer because we make the judgement that he attached his imagination to the unreal, not to reality. The figure is all imagination: imagination divorced from reality. We understand it but we do not participate in it. As Stevens puts it: "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (Stevens 1942: 6). Further, throughout history, the degrees of the imagination and of reality vary in literary works. One age may emphasize denotation in a work of art by stripping words of all associations, while another age, e.g. the modern or modernist age, may emphasize connotation, dissipating meaning in a "multiplicity of associations" (13) as in the works of James Joyce. These differences, Stevens claims, are "nothing more than changes in the relation between the imagination and reality" (loc. cit.). The relation between the imagination and reality possesses an internal and an external dimension. The internal dimension consists in cognition and perception as well as of the aesthetic form that realizes perception and cognition, the form conceived in the mind of the poet and projected by that mind. The external dimension consists in what Stevens refers to as *the pressure of reality*. The major manifestations of the pressure of reality in our age, i.e. from 1942, the midst of World War II, till the present moment in history, are the following: Firstly, an "intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic" accompanied by "an absence of any authority except force, operative or imminent" (17); secondly, the presence of events that "stir the emotions to violence" (22) and the ominous persistence of global warfare; and thirdly, the dismissal in physics and philosophy of the notion of substance and the detection in science and art of constant change, movement and vibration, a state of things as they are in an age such as ours; a dynamic reality complicating literary representation and demanding continuous experimentation and revision in the application of the poetic word. The sound of words is adapted instantly since the subject-matter of poetry is not solid, static objects but "the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it", Stevens notes (25).

Stevens intends to re-instate nobility in art. The integration of nobility in the artist and in the work of art is contingent upon the artistic individual's intuitive and aesthetic response to the pressure of reality as it exists today. The pressure of reality may be resisted or evaded in the case of "individuals of extraordinary imagination", Stevens asserts (23). The resistance does not entail a disavowal of the relation between reality and the imagination. On the contrary, it is "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (36). Stevens provides an example of 'violence from within', artistic violence in the sense of radical experiments with form, color and images. Epstein's flower paintings are described as exploding all over the picture space and generally opposing the rage of the world with a rage of form and color. The reference is to an exhibit at the Leicester Galleries in London in 1941. In Stevens' words, "the imagination gives to everything that it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility, of which there are many degrees" (33). This primary nobility is inherent, and it is the natural source of another, secondary nobility, one which is our "spiritual height and depth" (34). The contrast to this nobility is the diminished or degenerate nobility in art that is due to "failure in the relation between the imagination and reality" (13). The imagination must respond to reality by including it and metamorphosing it and re-creating it. The poet possessing such an imaginative capability is a "possible poet" to Stevens (27). Stevens characterizes this possible poet as follows:

He will consider that although he has himself witnessed, during the long period of his life, a general transition to reality, his own measure as a poet, in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth, is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in the imagination.  
(23)

The possible poet will make this decision after having understood that he cannot choose the imagination over reality; nor can he favor reality over the imagination. He recognizes that between these poles a "universal interdependence exists, and hence his choice and his decision must be that they are equal and inseparable" (24). The nature of poetry consists of the interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals, then, but Stevens hastens to add that this is not a definition, since it is incomplete. Further, the poet has no social obligation, nor does he have a moral one. Nevertheless, he is and must be contemporaneous. What is the function of the poet, then? Speaking of the poet's role vis-à-vis people in general and vis-à-vis the readers of poetry, Stevens gives us this answer: "I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people live their lives" (29). Stevens states that the poet addresses himself to an elite, i.e. those who are ready to receive his poetry. The artist, says

Stevens, “transforms us into epicures.” He must “discover the possible work of art in the real world”, following which he will either extract the work of art or compose it himself. The artist contemplates the world, enriches it, and “art sets out to express the human soul”. The culminating phrase used by Stevens in the present context is that “everything like a firm grasp of reality is eliminated from the aesthetic field” (30), which is a radical statement indeed. However, it should be clear at this point that Stevens is referring to the false intellectual preconception that reality may be grasped firmly when he declares that a ‘firm grasp of reality is eliminated.’ The sound of words remains true to reality when they are attuned to reality through the work of the imagination. The poet creates the world, giving “to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (31). In precisely this way the imagination pushes back against the pressure of reality, and so the sound of its words, the expression of the imagination, helps us live our lives. Although Stevens refrains from definitions, or rather, because he refrains from them, we may extract a subtly worked out poetics from his essay. His is a poetics of abstraction: a dual abstraction of the artist and of reality, indispensable to cognitive and aesthetic pursuits. The poetic act of endowing life with ‘the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it’ transcends any social and moral obligation, and in doing so expands the concept and practice of ethics.

The poetics of abstraction is the aesthetics by which the poet attains spiritual height and depth. Abstraction as derived from the Latin *ab-strahere* literally means to draw back, to withdraw, and it is in this sense Stevens is using the word. The poet withdraws himself and withdraws reality by placing them in the imagination. The initial act of withdrawal is followed by the act of poetic revelation in the imagination. The first act is the precondition for the second. The poet must withdraw, *ab-strahere*, before he can fulfill the creative act in the imagination. That makes the imagination an objective tool of creativity that adheres to and obeys the inherent rules guiding poetry. Hence the imagination is the immanent workshop of the artist where the world is not only subjected to mimesis but also created in the form of ‘supreme fictions’ that are more real than reality itself; such is the essence of Wallace Stevens’ poetics as I see it.



This essence emerges clearly and forcefully in Stevens’ simple statement that there is “a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live” (31). In his essay Stevens refers to a “blank space, nowhere, without color” (loc. cit.), commenting that this blank space may turn bright and glittering in the beauty of the morning that is silent and bare. This bareness comes to light in Stevens’ own poem “The Snow Man” from 1921, a poem that I see anticipating Stevens’ poetics of abstraction.

**“The Snow Man”**

One must have a mind of winter  
 To regard the frost and the boughs  
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;  
  
 And have been cold a long time  
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
  
 Of the January sun; and not to think  
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
 In the sound of a few leaves,  
  
 Which is the sound of the land  
 Full of the same wind  
 That is blowing in the same bare place  
  
 For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
 And, nothing himself, beholds  
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The ‘mind of winter’ is the poetic mind that has abstracted itself to become one with winter. The act of abstraction here involves attuning the mind and the imagination to the coldness of snow and frost on the boughs and attuning the senses, especially the auditory sense, to the sound of leaves and the

sound of the wind. The listener capable of tuning his ear to the sound of the wind will not think of any misery in the wind. He will understand that it is the sound of the land. He will also be able to perceive the distant glitter of the January sun from which he would have been barred if he had not abstracted himself. The listener is 'nothing himself' for he has completed the withdrawal that is the precondition for beholding 'Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.' The listener possesses an exclusive and an excluding ear: He does not engage in false imaginings as to things that are not there but sees only what *is*: 'the nothing that is' is existence and the world without projection, imposition and false intellectual speculation, and it is a life devoid of sensory deception. Stevens the poet's *nothing* is not nothingness.

Nothing is the negation of the static, the solid. Nothing is, the static is not, and hence the poem is not nihilistic. On the contrary, "The Snow Man" is an affirmation of the infinite potential of the bareness and silence that is the glittering beauty of winter. What is this infinite potential? It is a potential filling up, a fulfilling of a blank space in which an immanent fullness is already present, waiting to reveal itself as that which *is*. The poet's mind of winter and the world of winter share a common being. Stevens' poem establishes an ontological congruence. The winter's mind and the winter's world are aesthetically enhanced by the artist's imagination. The poem reveals Being in beauty. Aesthetic congruence co-exists with the ontological congruence. This dual congruence manifests itself on the level of *sound*: the sound of the land becomes the sound of words.



A revelation of Being in beauty occurs in Bruno Schulz's novella "Cinnamon Shops" (1934). Here revelation is unfolded slowly and culminates in a spatial expansion into the infinite. In the relation between the imagination and reality the imagination takes precedence. Schulz has stated that in this world there are no dead, solid, limited objects. It is only natural that he should emphasize the imagination, then, but this does not mean that he excludes reality. In the novella, reality is persistently present, even to the extent that we may speak of the pressure of reality in Stevens' sense. The measure of the poet, Stevens says, is the measure of his power to abstract *himself* and to abstract reality. The word 'himself' clearly indicates that the process of abstraction is personal, or rather, that the power feeding and propelling the abstraction is personal. It is a subjective generation of an objective abstraction. Schulz's statement to the effect that there are no limited objects would indicate that Schulz, like Stevens, is guided by a paradoxical conception: the idea that the power that is the source of abstraction is universally and objectively present, and yet implemented and realized aesthetically by the poetic subject. Abstraction is subjective and objective at one and the same time, and so is the imagination of the poet, otherwise the poet would be unable to capture the life that is lived.

Hence Schulz's novella is a first-person narrative. The I, narrator and protagonist, expresses a power, an energy that I would describe as the common source of reality and the imagination. Energy is doubled in the sense that it may be both negative and positive. It is visibly present as a negative force in the narrator's father who is described in the first paragraph of the novella as "already lost, sold, and surrendered to the other sphere" during the season "when the city reached out deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of winter nights" (Schulz 1963, 59). The father's head and face are wildly overgrown with grey hair, his sense of smell and hearing is sharpened, and he is in permanent contact with the unseen world of mouse-holes and dark corners. His psychic energy is submerged into a subconscious state from which it rarely emerges. The narrator's mother persuades the father to go to the theatre to distract him. But the theatrical presentation is hollow, the curtain is pale and blue, made to represent an "artificial sky". The illusory character of the stage is too obvious to the spectators. The narrator comments ironically that the dramatic illusion causes that "vibration of reality which, in metaphysical moments, we experience as the glimmer of revelation" (60). The artificially staged scenery of the night sky, though illusory, anticipates the narrator's revelatory experience at the end of the novella. The double or doubled energy is an aesthetic energy that may be channelled and expressed either as a false representation, an imitation and a surrogate, or as a positive force conducive to a genuine revelation. The quality and level of the expression depends on the extent to which reality is absorbed and re-created in the imagination. Abstraction may be artificial or artistic.

The scene in the theatre contains an interesting ambiguity: Although the stage is artificial it may cause a 'vibration of reality.' This is the narrator's comment. If it does not issue from the narrative 'I', then from the supra-narrator behind the 'I', or perhaps both in unison. The narrator's father, however, is bored and restless at the theatre and gives in to the pressure of reality, or rather, invents such a

pressure by sending his son home to fetch his wallet that apparently contains money and some important documents. On his way home the narrator loses his way and wanders past the cinnamon shops, so called because of their color, and suddenly finds himself in his high school. His wandering is due to an imagination that creates illusory maps of the city whose “streets are provided with new and fictitious configurations by the inexhaustible inventiveness of the night” (61). The winter night blends into spring and the snow turns into white fluff smelling of violets. The narrator describes the night sky: “On that night the sky laid bare its internal construction in many sections which, like quasi-anatomical exhibits, showed the spirals and whorls of light, the pale green solids of darkness, the plasma of space, the tissue of dreams” (loc.cit.). Certainly, what we have here is a description of a sky with no limited objects in it. Once in the high school the narrator recalls the late-night art classes conducted by Professor Arendt, whose enthusiasm for art attracted students. However, the artworks behind the closed door of the professor’s study are described as plaster cast heads with empty looks and ashen profiles, and the light in the study is opaque with “meditations dissolving into nothingness” (63). Once again, we have a description of artificiality, and yet it is the source of inspiration.

The recollections of the ‘I’ are followed by his wandering through the high school principal’s apartment that suddenly expands, ending in a large room opening out onto the city square. He climbs into a horse-driven cab and rides through the city without the driver, alone with the horse, through parks that magically turn into forests. The heavens are metamorphosed into a dome with fantastic lands and oceans while the air becomes easy to breathe and shimmers like silver gauze. The horse of its own will takes the narrator through a forest that seems to be illuminated by thousands of lights. The horse starts climbing a hill, exhausted and hardly able to wade through the mass of snow. The narrator’s description of the horse is fairytale-like:

At last we stopped, I got out of the cab. The horse was panting, hanging its head. I hugged its head to my breast and saw that there were tears in its large eyes. I noticed a round black wound on its belly. “Why did you not tell me?” I whispered, crying. “My dearest, I did it for you”, the horse said and became very small, like a wooden toy. I left him and felt wonderfully light and happy. (67)

The narrator starts running and experiences “the transformations of the sky.” Its multiple domes metamorphose into endless, increasingly complicated configurations. The transformation of reality in the imagination does not occur without a price. The price is the sacrifice of the horse, itself transformed into a wooden toy. The round wound on the belly of the horse is a bodily image of the transition from a painful reality to a magical world. The narrator is transported into this magic by the aid of the horse whose physical exertion becomes the vehicle of a metaphysical trans-posing. The otherworldly beauty experienced by the ‘I’ is made possible only by his abstracting himself and by abstracting reality. The horse with a human voice, as in a fairytale, is the medium of abstraction and wounded in the process of abstraction. The animal represents, or rather *is* the subjective energy of the narrative ‘I’ feeding the objective abstraction. The subjective perception of the winter sky and the objective phenomenon of the transformations of the sky are one. The narrative ‘I’ is a poet.



Bruno Schulz’s novella captures the invisible in a series of visual explosions. In Italo Calvino’s novel *Invisible Cities* (Le città invisibili, 1972) we find the following description of one of the fifty-five cities that all have feminine names, the city named Aglaura: “At certain hours, in certain places along the street, you see opening before you the hint of something unmistakable, rare, perhaps magnificent; you would like to say what it is, but everything previous said of Aglaura imprisons your words and obliges you to repeat rather than say” (Calvino 1974, 113).

If words fail as a medium of expression, you turn to another medium. Camille Pissaro’s painting “Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon. Effect of Rain” (1897) expresses the rareness and magnificence that Schulz was able to give voice to, and that Calvino could not utter, but merely repeat. The effect of rain in this image is precisely to dissolve those solid objects that Schulz spoke of. The Rue Saint-Honoré is transformed into more than just a wet surface covering the pavement. The street itself has become a flood, an ocean even, so that the surface is not just wet and therefore does not reflect the figures of vehicles, horse-drawn carriages and persons in the street. The sea of Saint-Honoré absorbs and transforms all figures standing or riding upon it so that they are not mirrored but dissolved into

a non-substantial element. The figures achieve their spiritual nature through the medium of paint in a metaphysical moment. The canvas blends the two elements of air and water, making them one. The sky falls as rain and becomes sky again as the watery ocean of the street Saint-Honoré is suffused with light. The effect of rain reverses the movement up-down and in doing so the rain expands and even abolishes the spatial dimension. The Rue Saint-Honoré is Schulz's infinite sky.

Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy* (*La jalousie*, 1957) would seem at first glance to reverse the trend towards the non-substantial, being as it is a work of 'objective literature', so called by himself and explored as such in an essay by Roland Barthes. Robbe-Grillet's precise, minute descriptions focus on the geometry of scene and movement and would seem to fall into the category of denotation in modern literature, a category qualified by Wallace Stevens as an "asceticism tending to kill language by stripping it of all association" (Stevens 13). I am sceptical to Robbe-Grillet's own designation of his novels as 'objective literature', which, according to the author, is only concerned with surfaces, as there is nothing that exists below the surface. In my view the author's textual treatment of the emotion jealousy contradicts his narrative theory since jealousy is a subjective feeling undermining the objective viewpoint. The passion of jealousy is expanded into a critical philosophical perspective and a leitmotif involving the limits of knowledge and perception.

The narrative takes place in a tropical climate, most likely a French colony, or former French colony. The plot is so sparse as to be virtually non-existent and there are only two characters, the anonymous woman A... and her friend and neighbor Franck with whom she meets regularly for lunch or dinner on the veranda of her house which overlooks a plantation. Franck is married but his wife is often ill and stays at home with their child. The house, the veranda, the plantation and the two characters are meticulously observed and described utilizing a geometric viewpoint disclosing the minutest details in the immediate surroundings and tracing the movement of sunlight and shadow throughout the day. This method would conform excellently to Stevens' concept of abstraction, were it not for the inherently limited perspective afforded by geometry. The objectivity of geometry and mathematics informing the narrative point of view in the novel is certainly a form of abstraction. However, the geometrically designed descriptions contain in-built limitations that are owing to the obvious difficulties connected with obtaining and maintaining a total view of the house, the veranda, the plantation outside the house, and the two characters.

The view is obstructed yet also facilitated by the Venetian blinds, *la jalousie*, the French word for blinds that lends an ambivalent meaning to the title of the work. The unseen narrator uses the word 'eye', positioned in the bedroom from where it overlooks the balustrade, to indicate the presence of an objectively observing individual constantly looking at the scene inside and outside the house, noting that this 'eye' naturally and of its own accord falls on the scene. The natural activity of the eye may occur from a position inside the house or from a position outside the house. The shifting of perspective from the inside to the outside is apparently contingent upon where A... is located at the time. One might therefore be inclined to assume that A... is the object of the unseen observer's jealousy since she is surveilled so closely. This may be the case. However, there is no evidence of an actual, physically present observer who might be the jealous person. There is no one in the house besides A... and the native servants. Franck's wife Christiane might be jealous of A..., whom Franck visits daily. She has commented on A... 's dress as being too tight for a hot climate.

As to the unseen and unknown observer who is one with the narrator constructing this so-called objective literature it becomes necessary to formulate a revised concept of jealousy; his or its jealousy



**Pissaro:** "Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon. Effect of Rain" (1897). Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.



is of a cognitive or epistemological nature. The jealousy emanating from the objective perspective originates in the interpretive limits that arise naturally from the somewhat restricted vantagepoint of the unknown narrator. His or its view of scene and character is considerably reduced, both when looking into the house, when A... is inside, and when looking out from the house, when she is outside, for he or it is confined to looking through the blinds, *la jalousie*, through which the view is divided into strips conforming to the chinks in the blinds when they are open.

It is in *this* situation that we find the cause of jealousy. What kind of jealousy? Initially, the reader is introduced to the common kind of jealousy that arises from the fact that you cannot see everything the object of your envy is doing, forcing you to engage in jealous speculation. More importantly, the jealousy involved here is the ill-feeling and the discomfort associated with not being able to see and know everything. The jealous subject appearing here is a subject acutely pained by the insight that he cannot know what he wants to know. He harbours this feeling despite his narrative position, which enables him to construct geometrically precise purviews of the scene and the players in it. He is unable to ascertain whether A's and Franck's faces touch when they are conversing on the veranda, and he cannot hear what they are saying.

The limited perspective of the eye is emphasized ironically when the narrator says that from a point on the balustrade located two steps from the corner an "oblique sight-line" enters the bedroom through the second window and "cuts diagonally across the foot of the bed to the chest". Then A... turns towards the light and "immediately disappears behind the section of wall that separates the two windows..." The observer/narrator discloses his own limited perspective, assigning it to the architecture of the house. In this way he questions and disavows his own method. A geometrically accurate view is contingent upon a design and a construction that obstructs accuracy. The design of the house dictates the narrative design, constituting a superb irony.

Any accurate tracing is confined to the scenery and to the movement of the sun during the day. The banana trees in the plantation are meticulously described as forming a "trapezoid" and a "zigzag line, with alternately protruding and receding angles." At a certain moment "the shadow of the outer edge of the roof coincides exactly with the right angle formed by the terrace and the two vertical surfaces of the house" (Robbe-Grillet 1995, 65). Accuracy falls short when it comes to interpreting the characters. The narrator comments that "A... has just completed the same operation without having seemed to move;" A... possesses "an abnormal immobility;" and "memory succeeds in reconstituting several movements of her right hand and her lips" (65), describing A's movements while sitting at her desk in the bedroom writing a letter, and yet the narrator is not capable of revealing the content of that letter. It may be the same letter that appears later in Franck's right-hand jacket pocket, but we cannot be sure of this. The narrator notes: "A... has stepped back again. To find her, the eye must be placed in the axis of the first window" (67). Obstructions of view occur constantly. They are not incidental. The text implies that A... consciously avoids surveillance by assuming a rigid, unnaturally immobile posture. It is also implied that she counteracts surveillance by keeping her large eyes wide open, maintaining a gaze that might be said to function as a parody of the vigilance of the observer. When she meets her own gaze in the bedroom mirror, she is practically petrified by it. This is an expression of the perversity of the narrative point of view and of the vigilant surveillance that fails to achieve its objective. Franck is also described as petrified, indicating that the effect of vigilance is a paralysis that obscures whatever is below the surface.

The following scene describes A... while writing a letter: "Although neither the arm nor the head seems disturbed by the slightest movement, the hair, more sensitive, captures the oscillations of the wrist, amplifies them, and translates them into unexpected eddies..." and "the head rises and begins to turn, slowly and steadily, toward the open window. The large eyes unblinkingly endure this transition to the direct light of the veranda" (72). The 'unblinking' quality of A...'s eyes makes her appear doll-like and mechanical. Movements performed by Franck's hands are often described as mechanical also. Significantly, descriptions of scenery and dialogue are repeated with slight variations throughout the narrative, e.g. Franck's squashing of a large centipede, which is repeated in detail five times; A...'s and Franck's trip to the port to shop is repeated several times; the conversation on the veranda, mostly on the topic of the climate and on an African novel they have been reading, is repeated with slight or no variation; etcetera. Moreover, different scenes overlap without transition, e.g. a photo of A... sitting in a cafe in a European city passes directly into the scene on the veranda. This creates a form of spatial nondifferentiation. Chronology is abolished to the effect that past, present and future events are shuffled so that everything appears to be happening in a continuous present.

The jealous 'eye' in Robbe-Grillet's novel is located on the borderline between reality and the imagination. Observing and interpreting reality involves abstraction, i.e. placing reality in the imagination,

as Stevens says. The question is whether Robbe-Grillet has accorded enough room for the imagination. In a way he has, since the narrative clearly indicates the problematic nature of the interdependence between the two. Realistic accuracy forms a textual fabric tending to exclude the imagination and the cognition of what is below the surface. The imagination intervenes and counteracts the exclusive fabric by pointing to what is lacking in realism and in denotation. In Robbe-Grillet's text the imagination is negatively present. This presence is sufficiently forceful to instil doubt and hesitancy in narrator and character.

The problematic nature of the interdependence between reality and the imagination is explained and clarified in Stevens's essay. The problem is philosophical and has to do with the relation between internal states and external things. It is this relation that forms the motif of Robbe-Grillet's novel. Referring to Bergson, Stevens states that the philosopher "describes the visual perception of a motionless object as the most stable of internal states" (Stevens 1942: 25). However, despite the fact that the object remains the same, the vision we have of it at the present moment in time differs from the vision we had of it a brief moment before because one of the time-lag between them. As for external things, Stevens notes that every object or body resolves itself in infinite vibrations, movements, and changes. Now I would describe the problem connected with the interdependence between reality and the imagination as follows: It is a problem of coincidence. In placing reality in the imagination, the artist strives to make the internal state, perception, coincide with the external state of things. In order to accomplish this, perception, the imagination, and the artwork must engage in the same or in a similar resolution in infinite vibrations, movements, and changes. Is it possible for a written text to accomplish this coincidence, this co-existence of internal and external states? In my opinion, this is not entirely, but approximately feasible. When words fail the artist chooses another medium. The internal and the external coincide in "Rue Saint-Honoré in the Afternoon" owing to the effect of rain. The coincidence of the two, and the approximate mimesis of the external state of things produced by the internal activity of the artist's mind is that which Stevens calls abstraction. In Robbe-Grillet's work the geometrical accuracy in the depiction of scenery and character is a valuable attempt to attain coincidence and abstraction. However, the observations of the narrator become a fixation that petrifies the characters, especially A... , who is therefore anonymous and mechanical, transfixed and fixated in an unblinking gaze.



The fixed, mechanical state of things is portrayed in Haruki Murakami's short story *TV People* (1993). The first-person narrator is employed as an electronic appliances designer and his wife, consistently called 'the wife,' works for a health-food magazine. Their everyday life is marked by routine and monotony; they rarely meet and almost never share a meal at home. One Sunday afternoon while home alone the narrator is disturbed by the sudden entrance of three "TV people" who carry a new TV set into his living-room, and then proceed to plug it. Prior to their entry into the apartment he had described the TV people as smaller than actual humans by a factor of 0.7:

TV People look as if they were reduced by photocopy, everything mechanically calibrated. Say their height has been reduced by a factor of 0.7, then their shoulder width is also in 0.7 reduction; ditto (0.7 reduction) for the feet, head, ears, and fingers. Like plastic models, only a little smaller than the real thing.

Or like perspective demos. Figures that look far away even close up. Something out of a trompe-l'oeil painting where the surface warps and buckles. An illusion where the hand fails to touch objects close by, yet brushes what is out of reach.

That's TV People. (Murakami 1993: 1997-1998)

The stage curtain in Schulz's novella was exactly like a 'trompe-l'oeil painting,' warping and buckling. The narrator in Murakami's story is aware of these illusory effects but powerless to stop them. He is transfixed and in a hallucinatory state when the TV people enter his apartment. His dazed state is, in fact, the reason they may enter at all. The monotony and tedium of his life prompts the set-up of the TV set which only he sees. When 'the wife' comes home she does not notice it. The TV exists in his mind only, and it exists there because of a perfect match between his internal state and external things, *in casu* external things as they are represented in the TV medium. The TV set that is plucked down in the narrator's living room exemplifies a diminishment, a veritable reduction of perception, perspective and abstraction. TV is an abstraction of the imagination, a form of surreal distortion mocking the artistic



achievements of geniuses in modern painting, the impressionists, the expressionists, and the abstract painters.

The TV people ignore the narrator as they set up the TV set, test it, and turn it on. He comments to himself that he is “devastated, powerless, in a trance” and that his body and mind are vanishing (202). He concludes that the TV people are in his mind, have invaded his head and are walking around in there. At work, in the middle of a meeting, the TV people appear again and again no one sees them except the narrator, and again they act as if he does not exist. At home he tries to turn to a channel on the TV set, but no picture emerges. Suddenly one of the TV people appears on screen, staring at him against a white fluorescent background. The character proceeds to show the narrator the interior of a factory where workers, so he says, are making an airplane. The narrator replies that it doesn’t look like an airplane at all. As he speaks, he notices that his voice has changed and has turned “strangely brittle, as if the nutrients had been strained out through a thick filter” (213). The TV person, whose face by now fills up the entire TV screen, explains that as soon as they have painted the plane in the right color it will look like an airplane, to which the narrator replies that it is not the color but the shape that is the problem. Meanwhile, he notices that it is late, and that his wife has not come home. As it happens, she does not return home at all, and the following morning the TV people comment that it is too bad about his wife: She has stayed out there. ‘Out there’ is of course on the other side of the TV screen. The narrator himself now exists inside the TV. As he continues to follow the work on the airplane, he notices that it is in fact starting to look like a plane, and, at the same time, he notices that his hands have shrunk; he has become one of the TV people. Then one of them claims that his wife will call in five minutes.

Murakami’s story may be categorized as comedy. But it also represents the deterioration of perception and the degrading of reality characteristic of contemporary technological culture. The flat perspective of the TV screen indeed establishes the coincidence of the internal and the external but in the form of travesty and the uncanny.



What I have chosen to call an approximate mimesis is, I believe, attained in Paul Auster’s recent novel *4321* (2016). The coincidental capturing of an internal and an external vibration is created by the narrator as he records the lives of four identical yet different protagonists named Archie Ferguson. The narrator himself is one of these Archies and the other three Fergusons make up three different, potential, i.e. possible versions of the same individual. The three possible variants of Archie Ferguson come into existence as a result of incidental or accidental events or choices that make their lives diverge while retaining some similarities. Archie Ferguson’s grandfather was a Russian Jew emigrating to the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Standing in line on Ellis Island waiting to be processed by the immigration officer, a fellow Russian immigrant advised him to tell the officer that his name was Rockefeller because his real name would be impossible for the officer to pronounce, much less write down. When his turn came, the officer asked him what his name was, to which Archie’s grandfather replied in Yiddish: *Ikh hob fargessen*. The officer recorded his name as Ichebold Ferguson. This name-change inaugurates a series of not only shifting, but outright erasure of identity. The Archie Ferguson variants are undergoing tumultuous changes in tumultuous times in the history of the USA, and these changes are of necessity captured in a discourse that I would characterize as more than dynamic: a breathless discourse creating a musical staccato effect. Stevens’ ‘sound of words’ is a distinct musical rhythm that is maintained throughout the narrative, and consists of extensive, sometimes seemingly endless paragraphs with short sentences punctuated by commas rather than by periods. This sound of words is matched by images, photographic pictures made by Archie Ferguson’s mother, Rose Adler. She “works with portable light stands, fold-up screens, and collapsible umbrellas, shooting writers in their book-filled studies or sitting behind their desks, painters in the tumult and splatter of their studios, pianists sitting behind or standing next to their gleaming black Steinways, actors looking into their dressing room mirrors...” (Auster 2016, 196). This method is perfected later when Rose Sadler takes pictures at a wedding, an unpaid job that had turned into a “binge of manic picture taking” as Rose is “freed from the restraints of laborious preparation and plunged into a whirl of rapid-fire compositions, one picture succeeding the next, ephemeral instants that had to be caught then or not at all...” (197). Rose Adler’s state of mind is described as “a kind of emotional fever, as if every face and body in the room had been rushing in on her at once, as if every person there were breathing inside her eyes, no longer on the other side of the camera but within her, an inseparable part of who she was” (loc.cit.). The relation between the external state

of chaos and the internal state of fever coincide extraordinarily here. Moreover, the artist's imagination abstracts the subjects of photography so that they are 'no longer on the other side of the camera' but *inside* the artist's mind.

The wedding guests react negatively to Rose Adler's photos, rejecting them as "incomprehensible," "dark and raw," and claiming that they make people look sinister and unhappy, and that even laughing people looked "vaguely demonic" (97). The photographer's imagination has captured all that is psychologically and spiritually different from the norm and the facade people present. Rose Adler's emotional fever and her exuberance in executing the photos makes her imagination into a specific artistic medium at a specific moment in American history, the 1950's, a time of transition. Wallace Stevens points out that it is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that "it is always at the end of an era" so that it "attaches itself to a new reality," responding to what Stevens refers to as the pressure of reality. The pressure of reality is a violent pressure, or the pressure of violence, in the transition from the 1950's to the 1960's, and Rose's photos and the power that drives them anticipate the emerging violence of the 1960's as her pictures become a violence from within, as in Epstein's flower paintings. As Stevens says, it is the violence within that protects us from the violence without. The imagination presses back against the pressure of reality, thereby resisting it; such is the measure of the poet's power to abstract himself, and part of that abstraction process, then, is to push back against the pressure of reality by mobilizing an equal counteracting force. Stevens' essay was written on the background of World War II, where, as he states, "life was physically violent for millions" and "spiritually violent" for "everyone alive" (26-27).



Now, the question we must try to answer is this: Is the artist's power, *in casu* Rose Adler's feverish state of mind and the "ferocity of concentration" going into taking the photos, aligned with the violence Stevens speaks of? Stevens answers in the affirmative, naming the creative power of the poet a violence from within. Here, the violence within is an equal counteracting force that is neutral, yet subjective' Rose Adler's poetic power is paralleled in the novel's staccato-like discourse, anticipating violent events in the USA of the 1960's, which Auster's novel describes in detail. The novel is also a social history of America from the 1940's through the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, and it includes accounts of the anti-war demonstrations during the Vietnam War, as well as the killing of J.F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, in 1963, of which one of the Archie Fergusons says: "The man of the future was dead." The statement is followed by the words *Unreal city* and "Two roads diverged in an unreal city and the future was dead" (Auster 2016, 144). The 'unreal city' is a reference to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and 'Two roads diverged' is a reference to Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." The poem expresses the coalescence of choice and accident: a choice between two roads could not have been made unless the roads suddenly diverged. This coalescence in Frost's poem characterizes exactly the course of events, and the artist's decision to present four possible variants of Archie Ferguson. The death of J.F. Kennedy turns Dallas and, by implication, New York City into unreal cities. Death signals an irretrievable loss as the future is cancelled.

Another very different death occurs when one of the Archie Fergusons attends summer camp at the age of thirteen. A thunderstorm accompanied by pouring rain lures him out of the camp cabin. During the rain storm Ferguson felt happy and exultant as he ran straight out into the storm and stood under a big tree, ignoring the counsellor's admonition to return to camp:

Ferguson couldn't hear a word he was saying, not with the noise of the rain and the thunder, and especially not when Ferguson himself began to howl, no longer George on his mission to save Lennie but simply Ferguson himself, a thirteen-year-old boy wailing in exaltation at the thought of being alive in such a world as the one he had been given that morning. (184)

Lightning strikes a top branch of the tree, which breaks off and cracks down on Ferguson's head, killing him, demonstrating that death can also be the effect of rain. Archie's death is a very different one from Kennedy's. Archie's death is a culmination of life, a life in exuberance and ecstasy, even, as in *ek-stasis*. Ferguson is in a state beside himself. This state of ek-stasis is the counteractive force pressing back against the pressure of reality. This force is one with the artist's power. The passage concludes with the words "and from one end of the earth to the other, the gods were silent" (loc. cit.). The gods need not speak. The artist creates the sound of words.

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